Researching the Social Impact of the Arts: Literature, Fiction and the Novel

Abstract

This paper offers a contribution to current debates in the field of cultural policy about the social impact of the arts. It explores the conceptual difficulties that arise in the notion of 'the arts' and the implications of these difficulties for attempts to generalise about their value, function and impact. It considers both 'essentialist' and 'institutional' perspectives, first on 'the arts' *in toto* and then on literature, fiction and the novel with the view of making an innovative intellectual connection between aesthetic theories and contemporary cultural policy discourse. The paper shows how literature sits uneasily in the main systems of classifying the arts and how the novel and fiction itself are seen as problematic categories. The position of the novel in the literary canon is also discussed, with particular reference to the shifting instability of the canon. The paper suggests that the dilemmas thrown up in trying to define or classify the novel are likely to be encountered in attempting to define other art forms. The implications of these findings for the interpretation and conduct of traditional 'impact studies' are explored.

N.B. ***author identifying references have been omitted from both text and bibliography for the sake of the review process.***

Introduction

In recent years, a number of studies have been produced in Western countries, which purport to show that engagement with the arts has positive impacts on individuals and societies (Reeves 2002, 106-115). Of course, this is not a new phenomenon and, as we have shown elsewhere (XXX & XXX 2008), debate about the value, function and impact of the arts has been a fairly constant feature of Western intellectual history since Aristotle first developed his theories of catharsis in the fourth century BC.

However, what distinguishes recent impact studies, as they have come to be known, is that they have almost all been conducted with the specific objective of demonstrating that government funding of the arts, whether at national, regional or local level, is worthwhile. This has meant that these studies have not, on the whole, been produced in the spirit of scholarly enquiry, but more in that of advocacy by those wishing to advance specific institutional interests.

Instead of questioning whether or not the arts actually do have the impacts claimed for them, researchers have therefore directed their efforts to coming up with evidence that they do. As a consequence, impact studies have suffered from methodological flaws, which have been subjected to quite extensive scholarly critique (e.g. Hansen, 1995; Hughes, 1989; van Puffelen, 1996; Belfiore, 2002; Merli, 2002). Most impact studies have been conducted by consultants, but academics have also joined in.[1] This has led to charges that the field is characterised not so much by independent, critical researchers but more by 'hired hands' (Nielsen, 1999).

The proliferation of such studies can, to a very large extent, be explained by the growing prominence of evidence-based policy-making. In the arts sector, as elsewhere, it has no longer been enough for agencies funded by tax-payers to assert the value of their activities: it has been necessary to provide evidence of their success in meeting pre-determined performance targets. However, the production of evidence to meet the demands of evidence-based policy-making is not synonymous – or at least has not been up to now – with an honest attempt to understand either the social impact

[1] See, for instance, Dean *et al.* 2001; Long *et.al.* 2002; Maughan and Bianchini 2003; Woods *et. al.* 2004; Hooper-Greenhill 2004.

of the arts or the conceptual and methodological difficulties that stand in the way of gaining such an understanding.

It is precisely to illuminate these difficulties that this paper has been written. It is the result of the third phase of a larger research project, whose principal aim has been to develop a more rigorous and nuanced understanding of how the value, function and impacts of the arts in modern societies can be articulated.[2] Each phase of the project has been written up as a 'stand alone' publication, designed to be of interest in its own right, but also to cross-refer where relevant.

The first phase has resulted in an extended analysis of the claims that have been made in the West over time, from Classical Greece (V century BC) to the present day, for the ways in which the arts can affect individuals and society.[3] It offers a taxonomy of these suggested impacts, both positive and negative, with a view to establishing an appropriate conceptual basis for the discussion and investigation of what the social impact of the arts might mean. At the same time, it attempts to reconnect contemporary policy debates with a complex intellectual history, from which it is argued that these debates have become detached.

The second phase of the research was based on the premise that a better grasp of the interaction between the individual and the work of art was a necessary foundation for a genuine understanding of *how* the arts could affect people. We have therefore explored the social, cultural and psychological factors that shape the aesthetic experience and proposed a classification of what we see as the key 'determinants of impact'. These are distinguished into three groups: those that are inherent to the individual who interacts with the artwork; those that are inherent to the artwork; and 'environmental factors', which are extrinsic to both the individual and the artwork (XXX & XXX 2007b).

The third phase of the research, of which this paper is the outcome, focuses on the theoretical and definitional problems that arise when we ask ourselves the question of what it is precisely that we are trying to assess the impact of. This may seem a very

[2] The project has been conducted by the authors at the XXX at the University of XXX and jointly funded for a period of three years by the AHRC and ACE.
[3] XXX & XXX (2007a & 2008).

basic question, but in the many public pronouncements about the value of the arts, which impact studies have so often been designed to shore up, it is wrongly assumed that there is a common understanding of what the arts may be taken to represent. At the same time, there is rarely any acknowledgement of quite how complex the conceptual problems are that underlie such a seemingly simple question.

So, for example, when Arts Council England tells us, as it did in its 2003 manifesto, *Ambitions for the Arts 2003-2006,* that 'being involved in the arts can have a lasting and transforming effect on many aspects of people's lives', it is assumed that we know what it is that is going to produce this transformation. Similarly, when we read in the *New Statesman's* July 2006 Arts Lecture, delivered by Peter Hewitt, then Arts Council England Chief Executive, that the arts also need to be recognised for 'their contribution to other public agendas, such as education, health, home affairs, foreign policy and the economy', the arts are assumed to be an easily identifiable entity with clearly recognizable effects.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore the conceptual difficulties inherent in the notion of 'the arts' and the implications of these difficulties for attempts to generalise about their value, function or impact. Research into the social impacts of the arts seems, up until now, to have concentrated mostly on the exploration of the experiences undergone by those who engage with the arts, by attempting to assess, measure and interpret their response to aesthetic stimulation. This paper thus aims to focus on the other crucial component in the aesthetic encounter, namely, the nature of the artwork itself. It is our premise that, without a clear understanding of the ontological nature and the inner workings of each art form it would be impossible to identify those characteristics within it which are likely to provoke a response, or indeed an impact, on the person engaging with it. To borrow Marghanita Laski's (1980, ch., 4) expression, we need to try and capture the nature of the work of art if we want to understand what makes it into a 'trigger' of potentially transformative aesthetic experiences[4].

What we consider here, therefore, are the problems of making generalisations about the arts – not just the arts *in toto*, but also within what at first glance might seem to be

[4] We discuss other aspects and mechanisms relating to aesthetic responses fully in XXX and XXX 2007b

the homogeneous manifestations of one artform. Indeed, after some preliminary observations on the difficulties of conceptualising of the arts in general, we move swiftly on to a more narrow focus, namely, that of the novel, which, as the section below explains, is the principal subject of this paper.

The objection might be made that the novel does not feature strongly in contemporary discourses about the impact of the arts and therefore makes a poor choice as a case study. Indeed, arts impact research assessment has tended, so far, to focus on those areas that are more heavily subsidised from public funds - such as the visual and performing arts, as a direct result of the advocacy agenda that has dominated this area of enquiry (Belfiore & Bennett 2007) – and on cultural activities of a participatory nature, on account of the fact that assessing the impacts of 'active' cultural participation can be deemed to be a more straightforward exercise than the assessment of other, more complex forms of artistic enjoyment (Belfiore 2006). Yet, these well documented trends have resulted in the narrowing down of arts impact research in accordance to the pragmatic needs of arts administrators and policy-makers, at the expense of a genuine attempt to further the understanding of how a diverse range of artistic engagements may affect people. This paper, therefore, presents a different approach, starting from a focus on a significant but as of yet unexplored area of cultural participation. We would indeed argue that the reading of novels represents a very significant cultural practice for many people and that it is precisely because it has been largely neglected in impact studies (probably because of its limited reliance on public funding) that it merits our attention. Furthermore, the kind of conceptual difficulties that we identify in attempting to classify or define the novel are precisely those that arise when we attempt to explore the impact of *any* of the arts, and the intellectual exploration presented here has therefore relevance beyond the scope of the specific case study.

It might be further objected that the theories of literature, fiction and the novel that we refer to in our discussion are already well-known amongst scholars of literature and aesthetics. However, this would be to miss the point of the paper, which is to connect these theories to current policy debates about the impact of the arts. Indeed, we would suggest that it is this linking of aesthetic and literary theory with contemporary policy preoccupations that actually represents the paper's originality.

Conceptualising the arts

Notions of 'art' and 'the arts' have been evolving over the centuries and have engendered long-lasting philosophical debates over their ontological nature. In a previous publication (XXX & XXX 2008), we charted the many attempts made within aesthetic philosophy to provide a convincing answer to the question 'what is art?' In particular, we noted the quest of 'essentialist' thinkers for the identification of the fundamental – or, indeed, essential - qualities of the arts; and we noted the deferral to the authority of the artworld' in 'institutional' definitions of art. We also illustrated the degree to which understandings of what constituted the arts were always historically determined. In his book *The Invention of Art*, Larry Shiner (2001, 3) indeed reminds us that "[t]he modern system of art is not an essence or a fate but something we have made. Art as we have generally understood it is a European invention barely two hundred years old". As such, 'art' is not only a historically defined concept, but also a culturally and geographically specific one, which draws on complex theoretical notions, such as the distinction between 'art' and 'craft' and the resulting centrality of the artist[5]. Shiner thus warns us against any easy reduction of non-Western cultural and artistic traditions to European notions of the fine arts and aesthetics.

While the quest for a universally valid 'essence of art' might be destined to fail, institutional theories of the arts have fared little better in providing the grounds on which a robust concept of 'art' or 'the arts' might be built. This is because the artworld itself does not have a shared notion of 'the arts' to which it subscribes or even accepts. A recent example of this is the controversy surrounding the decision to invite the Spanish celebrity chef, Ferran Adriá, to present his work at Documenta 12, the 2007 version of one of the most prestigious contemporary art exhibitions in the West. Predictably, the invitation triggered an outburst of indignation in the arts

[5] As Richard Sennett (2008, 73) explains in his latest book, *The Craftsman*, there are a number of distinctions that have been drawn, from the Renaissance onwards, between art and craft; these revolve around notions of agency and the perception of the artists' greater autonomy. We discuss such distinctions in greater detail in XXX and XXX 2008.

community, re-opening the perennial debate about what constitutes contemporary art (Keeley 2007).

It is worth registering here Umberto Eco's (1968, 23) suggestion that the defining characteristic of contemporary aesthetic thought is precisely the abandonment of the quest for an aprioristic definition of art, founded on the presumption of art's immutable and ontological essence. In its place is posited a more open and phenomenological understanding of what the arts are, which can account for the personal and diverse nature of people's aesthetic experiences. What Eco calls for, in other words, is a more flexible and non-normative approach to definitional matters, that can reflect and accommodate the pluralisation of cultural authority that is characteristic of intellectual life in the postmodern world (Bennett 2001 and 2007). This has recently been expressed in its most extreme form by the Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford University, John Carey, who concludes in his book, *What Good are the Arts?*, that "a work of art is anything that anyone has considered a work of art" (2005, 29)[7].

These brief observations do not pretend to offer an exhaustive description of these aesthetic debates, yet they clearly indicate the scale of the problems encountered if one begins to think seriously about understanding the impacts of 'the arts'. Without a normative notion of what constitutes 'the arts', it is very difficult to see how a coherent analysis of their impact could ever be produced. Even if such a notion could be constructed, there is the further problem of commensurability: the arts produce such a diverse range of aesthetic experiences that their commensurability can by no means be taken for granted. Is there any way, for example, that the experience of, say, listening to the London Symphony Orchestra play Prokofiev's Symphony No 5 can be meaningfully compared to the experience of gazing on Andy Warhol's screenprint series of reigning queens? What, however, if the focus were to be narrowed? Might it

[7] Carey's position of cultural relativism and his contention that the aesthetic experiences of others are by default impenetrable because "we have no means of knowing the inner experience of other people, and therefore no means of judging the kind of pleasure they get from whatever happens to give them pleasure" (2005, 23) are obviously incompatible with any attempt to assess the impact of the arts. Whilst it is important to record here that such relativist positions are part of the discourse of the field, we would refer the reader to XXX and XXX 2007b for a confutation of Carey's relativism and an alternative theoretical articulation of the aesthetic experience which, allows for the possibility of studying aesthetic responses.

not be possible to find consistency and commensurability within one form of art, which would then provide a conceptually sound basis for exploring the question of impacts? To answer this question, we now turn our attention to what might be said to constitute literature and the 'novel'.

The Classifying Impetus and the 'non-compliance' of literature

As we have noted of the arts in general, literature and the novel cannot easily be ontologically defined. Arts Council England, for example, does not even attempt it in its own definition of literature, but focuses instead on its dynamic qualities:

> Literature is a constantly evolving artform. At its core is the book and the page, yet even the written word is in flux when we think of graphic novels, e-literature, hypertext, literature in performance and all the other variations on a theme that make literature so dynamic.[8]

As Robert Alter (1996, 25) explains, the fact that literature is neither a stable nor coherent entity is proven by the constantly changing and shifting nature of the literary canon:

> As cultural fashions change and new values come to the fore, writers once deemed peripheral or uncanonical are brought into the canon, others once thought central being displaced to the margins. More drastically, books that were not originally imagined to belong to the category of literature, like Augustine's *Confessions*, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, are read into the canon and discussed in the same breath – or in the same course – with novels and poems. The pronounced tendency of our own time has been towards a new inclusiveness, a taking into the canon of philosophers and theorists of culture, previously neglected women writers, unrecognized minority writers, practitioners of folk poetry, and other forms of expression once held to be subliterary.

Yet accepting that both the nature of literature and the composition of the literary canon are in a continual state of flux does not get us very far in determining what it is

[8] From ACE's web site: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/subjects/homepage.php?sid=11#lp (accessed on the 20th June 2007).

that we are trying to understand the impact of when we ask if literature can change lives. Perhaps, therefore, we can find some further assistance from what might be termed 'the classifying impetus' of the Western tradition of philosophical thinking. In this tradition, several attempts have been made to classify and make sense of the arts, to understand what defines them as 'the arts', to determine what distinguishes them from all other things that are not art, and to identify what unites them so that they can be brought together under the label 'the arts'.

The first attempts at devising a classification of the arts date from antiquity, when the notion of the arts was much broader and more general than ours. Indeed, in antiquity, the term 'arts' referred to all those activities requiring skill and, more specifically, the type of skill that could be taught and learned (Kristeller 1951, 508). Under the umbrella term of 'the arts', therefore, could be found activities as diverse as shoemaking, shipbuilding, sculpture and painting. It was then precisely because of its breadth that some internal differentiation was progressively brought into the concept of art so that it might be more meaningful and useful (Tatarkiewicz 1963, 232). Tatarkiewicz (1963 and 1973) identifies as many as eight different main classifications of the arts in antiquity as well as numerous others deriving from various combinations of those original eight.

This classificatory impetus has by no means exhausted itself in modern times. One of the contemporary attempts at classification that has gained wide acceptance from contemporary aesthetics scholars revolves around the distinction between the plastic arts of painting and sculpture on the one hand, and music, dance and drama on the other (Shusterman 1978, 317). As Urmson (*Ibid.*, 334-5) explains, the first group of art forms thus identified includes all the art forms in which "the creative artist himself normally fashions the object which is the work of art"; in this case, the artwork is "a physical object which can be stolen, or defaced, or stored in a bank and can need to be preserved and restored" (e.g. a painting). On the other hand, the art forms in the second group (to which art forms such as music, theatre, dance and musical theatre belong) are characterised by the fact that the spectator cannot enjoy the effort of the creative artist directly and without intermediaries. For in this case, as Urmson (*Ibid.*) explains, "[t]here is a need for executant artists, with a serious aesthetic role as interpreters". The most obvious example here would be the composer who creates a

musical score for the performing musician to interpret. The 'identity' of the works of art in this second group is less straightforward, in that a symphony, a ballet or a play cannot be easily identified with a physical object, such as a manuscript or a musical score, nor, for that matter, with a performance, for there can be many performances for any one musical score, and they all are equally 'authentic' (*Ibid*.).

In the context of this classification of the arts, literature tends to be included in this second group, yet it sits uncomfortably within this framework, as its ontological identity is much more ambiguous than that of the other arts: on the one hand, there seem to be no executants or performers involved, for the reading of novels involves only the reader and the novelist with no need for any intermediary. On the other hand, works of literature share the 'identity problems' of the artforms that belong to the category of the performing arts: works of literature cannot be identified with any one physical object created by the writer (*Ibid.*, 336-7). Peter Kivy (2006, 4) concurs on the complex ontological status of works of literature: "You have your copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, I have mine. But, I would urge, our copies of the novel are not tokens of the type *Pride and Prejudice* […]. All of the many copies of *Pride and Prejudice* are tokens of a type, but that type is not the work: it is the notation of the work".

In order to find a way out of the impasse represented by the difficulty of fitting literature within the well-established categorizations of the arts discussed above, a number of aesthetic philosophers have put forward what might at first glance appear as a startling suggestion: that literature might in fact be, *ontologically*, a form of performance (Herrnstein Smith 1970; Kivy 2006; Schusterman 1978; Urmson 1977).

Literature as Performance

The suggestion that literature is, in fact, best understood as a form of performance has been most recently made by Peter Kivy (2006) in his book *The Performance of Reading*. Kivy's main thesis is as follows (p. 18):

> We can see the stream of literature as a continuous one of work/performance ontology. We are encouraged to do so, for one, because fictional literature, *all* fictional literature has been, for almost *all* of its history, a history of literature

> as performance, even when the literature has been "read" in private by the solitary reader. For even then he was read to, or read aloud, performed aloud, to himself. Silently read fictional literature, viewed in this perspective, is not discontinuous with its historical predecessors. It is completely continuous with them and with their history. Reading silently, viewed in this way, is not an ontological change from the work/performance ontology. Is it just the next logical step, into a performance of a different kind, a silent performance, but clearly recognizable as *performance*.

As we have seen, Kivy's argument on the ontological nature of literature is built on the observation that, originally, all poetry and works of literature were transmitted orally. Literature continued to be performed (or at least read aloud) much after classical antiquity and well into the modern age, for even after the invention of the printing press, only a very few privileged people would have had access to books. Furthermore, even in times when books were available, ancient sources still offer no record of silent reading: no classical author ever described the type of rapid, silent reading of texts that is now prevalent (Saenger 1997, 9). For the majority of people who had access to it, then, any experience of fictional literature would have still remained the experience of performed works. According to the thesis put forward by Paul Saenger (1997) in his fascinating essay *Space Between Words,* in the evolution towards silent reading, the separation of words in written texts, which began in the early Middle Ages, proved more determinant than the invention of the printing press (p. ix).

Indeed, before this time, books were written in what palaeography refers to as *scriptura continua*, that is, without any spaces between words. The implications of this go beyond the mere notation of texts, for *scriptura continua* entails the need, for the reader, to read aloud (and slowly) in order to make sense of the text. Reading aloud – or, in fact, performing – the text was the only way for the reader to make sense of where a word ended and a new one begun in the absence of spaces between words. This need for an oral manipulation of the text entailed a particular way of reading, from a cognitive perspective. As Saenger (1997, 3) explains, different modes of reading entail different cognitive processes: "[r]esearch indicates that English-speaking subjects have discrete systems within the brain for the aural understanding

and the silent visual understanding of language". In other words, the cognitive mechanisms that are at work when one reads aloud and when one reads silently are different ones, so that ultimately it can be inferred that the modern reader's experience of the text is profoundly different from that of readers in pre-modern times. Thus, when we refer to the activity of 'reading for pleasure' (in the contemporary sense of reading a piece of fictional literature, most usually a novel, silently and for the pleasure of it) we in fact refer to what is effectively a 'modern' aesthetic experience.

To go back to our original discussion of the ontological ambiguity of literature (as compared to the other arts) and the consequent difficulties of making literature fit into various classificatory models for the arts, Kivy (2006) suggests that, in order to fully grasp the connection between literature and performance, we need to think of reading as the setting up of a silent performance of the reader to him-herself (in what is, effectively, an internal and silent version of the pre-modern *modus legendi*). In order to achieve this, we need to re-think the commonly accepted wisdom with regards to the development of literature, and to recognise that literature has been 'performed' until "at some point, not much earlier than the early modern period, the stream diverged into two branches: the performance branch, properly so-called, and the read-to-yourself branch, with the modern novel as its centrepiece" (p. 17).

What are the implications of this thesis for our discussion of the impacts of reading? Are we to conclude that if theatrical performances and the silent reading of works of fiction are ontologically cognate, the effects of the two experiences on the person that engages in them are also to be similar? In an earlier publication (XXX & XXX 2007) we have presented an extensive discussion of the aesthetic experience, and we have shown how, in some respects, the theatrical and reading experiences might be seen to share a certain affinity. For instance, for children and young people, a good plot is the main criterion for the enjoyment of both theatrical performances and books. The correlation between gender, age and cultural participation is valid for both activities, with women in their fifties accounting for the highest rates of fiction reading and theatre attendances (XXX & XXX 2007b). Yet, what the paper also shows is the extent to which each individual's experience of a certain artwork is highly subjective and art-form specific, and also shaped by cultural and social conditioning as well as personal and environmental factors, so that *any* generalization would necessarily fail

to account for such a degree of subjectivity and diversity. Thus, the easy assumption that a plausible ontological affinity between literature and performance may automatically entail the affinity of the experiences that they provide would appear not to survive close intellectual scrutiny.

There is a further observation that we can make on the basis of the discussion so far which is of relevance to the discussion of the impacts of reading. Arguably, the experience of reading for pleasure is likely to be strongly shaped by the linguistic and cultural background of the reader: different languages, with differing transcription systems, require different cognitive abilities and mechanisms for the text to be decoded. Such differences are indeed reflected in differences in language pedagogy in different cultures. The Japanese written language, for instance, has no word separation, and this is why group oral recitations in class have a crucial place in children's language education (Saenger 1997, 2 ff.).

In other words, for readers of different cultures, reading is – at least from a cognitive point of view – a very different exercise. Languages whose graphic transcription makes the decoding of the text ambiguous or cognitively more challenging require the young reader to manipulate the sentences orally (or, one could say to 'perform' them) as a means to help him or her make sense of them. Whether an oral dimension is part of the reading process or not is an important matter, for – as Saenger (1997, 3) reminds us - "the cerebral processes necessary for recognizing characters have loci in the brain that are distinct from those used to decode phonetic transcription". Does this mean, then, that the reading experience of a Japanese reader reading a Japanese text will be substantially different from the experience of an English reader reading an English version of the same text? Or does this mean that the *same* novel might affect the *same* person differently depending on whether it is read silently to oneself or enjoyed in a audio-book format (on account of the fact that the experience would be, from a cognitive perspective, very different in either case)?

Saenger's book does not bring his argument to such conclusions (which fall beyond its scope). Nevertheless, these questions do seem to cast further doubt over the possibility both of discussing (and even more so, measuring) the 'impacts of reading literature' in abstract terms and of generalising about the effects of reading on

'people', irrespective of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and modes of literary comsumption.

This section of the paper, then, helps us to make sense of the millennial difficulties in attaining a satisfactory classification of the arts, and, more specifically a classification in which literature can adequately fit: the reason why literature struggles to fit into the numerous and diverse classifications of the arts that have been put forward over time might in fact lie in literature's ontological ambiguity which any classification cannot but reflect. Such ontological ambiguity is further compounded by the sheer diversity of the category of 'literature', which includes art forms as diverse as poetry and prose literature, autobiography and non-fiction writing more generally (Schusterman 1978, 323). Nevertheless, as we have shown, these ontological matters have clear repercussions for the study of the impacts of reading literature that cannot be ignored. The following section of the paper, therefore, will move the analysis from the more general area of literature to the more specific case of the novel, in the attempt to establish whether a narrower focus might help us to reach an adequate understanding of what novels are that might, in turn, offer a solid base for the exploration of their impacts.

What is the Novel?

The literary theorist, Tsvetan Todorov, comes to the conclusion, presented in his *La Notion de la Littérature* (1978), that there are no clearly identifiable sets of rules that can easily allow us to separate 'literature' from other types of discourse (in Davis 1989, 420). Unsurprisingly, thus, this part of the paper will show how a discussion of the novel does incur definitional issues not dissimilar to the ones already explored in relation to the general categories of 'art' and 'the arts'. Nevertheless, if we are to develop a solid methodology for the evaluation of the impact of novel-reading, we still need to engage with the question of attempting to define what it is that we are trying to assess the impact of. If we look back in time, the concept of the novel resulted, originally, from the desire to differentiate it from earlier and well-established forms of writing: romance, epic, satire and history (Roberts 1994a, 1). In 1785, the gothic novelist Clara Reeve, in her essay *The Progress of Romance*, differentiates

between the romance and the novel thus: “The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written” (in Roberts 1994a, 2). Reeve here is highlighting one of the main features of the novel (at least in its traditional form), namely its attempt to provide a realistic, and therefore credible, picture of reality. Walter Scott was thus expressing a widely held conviction when, in 1824, he argued that the novel concerned itself with the “ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society” (in Roberts 1994a, 2). While the emphasis was on the credibility of representation, all the novelists themselves and the earliest literary critics remained clear that at the heart of the novel was the telling of a story created by the writer. As Gustave Flaubert pointed out in a letter to Turgenev and in response to the growing popularity of Emile Zola’s version of naturalism, “[r]eality … ought to be no more than a spring-board” (in Allott 1959, 69).

The imaginative nature of the plot and the writing therefore is central to a definition of the novel, irrespective of its tighter or looser relationship to reality. It would then appear, at least at first sight, that we might have come a long way in our quest for a definition of the novel, by suggesting that this might be conceived of as a text of a fictional nature that portrays facts and characters that might be forged by the author in more or less close imitation of reality. Nevertheless, as we will see, this is far from being a straightforward or easily acceptable definition of the novel, on account of the theoretical questions thrown up by the introduction, in our discussion, of the very notion of fiction, to which the next section is devoted.

On the Slippery Nature of Fiction

There is a widespread consensus among literary theorists on what we have referred to as ‘the slippery nature of fiction’. Lamarque (2001, 453) poses an important question when he asks: “[a]re literary works essentially fictional? No satisfactory answer can be given without an adequate conception of fiction, yet that concept has proved remarkably elusive to definition”. Davies (2001, 263) concurs and maintains that “[f]ew concepts in the arts are as central to our ordinary commerce with art works yet as philosophically problematic as that of fiction”. Why, then, is the notion of fiction

so philosophically complex? What are the reasons for the widely shared view that it is difficult to pinpoint the characteristics of a text that irrevocably identify it as a work of fiction?

These questions are at the heart of contemporary narrative and literary theory, and we therefore cannot hope to deal with them exhaustively here. However, a few observations raised by writers in these areas can illuminate the exploration on hand. Lamarque (1996) and Currie (1990) maintain that it would be pointless to search for any *intrinsic* qualities of a text that can function as an indication of its fictional nature. For instance, while most fictions are language-based (so that, as is the case for the novel, their standard mode of appreciation is through reading), not all language-based narratives are fiction. As Currie (1990, 2) points out, elements such as plot, style, narrative forms are central to fictions, yet they do not necessarily equate with it. A diarist and a novelists might produce two identical texts, corresponding to one another in every detail, including punctuation or spelling; nevertheless, one will be a diary (thus, non-fiction), while the other will remain a work of fiction (a novel in the form of a diary). According to Currie (1990, 22), to solve this ambiguity, we need to look to 'authorial intentions' as the key aspect of any 'act of *fiction-making*', since "the idea of an author intending that the audience make believe his story is central to the explanation of what fiction is". Peter Lamarque (1996, 25) similarly maintains that "it is the writer's intentions that determine fictionality" rather than either style or content.

The thesis discussed above, thus, would appear to provide a means to begin to untangle fiction from non-fiction and differentiate the one from the other on the basis of the subject matter, the authorial intentions and the different types of speech acts that they entail (Leitch 1986, 166). Yet, the demarcation between the two, as the next section will show, is not as straightforward as might at first seem.

Fiction and non-fiction

The various theses discussed so far would seem indeed to provide a convincing means of distinguishing fiction from non-fiction, thus coming some way to answering the original question on the nature of the novel. However, there are other activities that

have been recently linked to notions of narrative, fiction and storytelling, and for which 'authorial intentions' or the distinction between 'fictional' or 'serious' utterances are much less straightforward. For instance, the very possibility of any relatively uncomplicated distinction between history-writing and fiction-writing has been called into question by the so-called 'postmodernist challenge' to the disciplines of history and traditional historiography (Graf 2003). At the root of such challenges are the claims, on the part of postmodernist historians, that traditional historiography is profoundly imbued with preconceptions and values that are not acknowledged, but taken for granted and presented as natural (Jenkins 2004).

A direct result of the postmodern questioning of the 'truth-claims' of the historical disciplines and historical writing, has been the development of the idea that history is, in fact, just able to provide a *narrative*, one of the many possible versions of the past, and thus cannot aspire to any degree of truthfulness or objectivity (Jenkins 2003, 376). Young (2002, 105) pushes this argument one step further and suggests a close relationship between history and fiction: "[t]he model is that of the historian as artist, the scholar actively and persistently engaged in cultivating the artist's penetrating eye". From such premises, Young (*Ibid.*) develops "the idea of history as literature and literature as history".

The distinction between fiction and non-fiction becomes even less clear-cut if we consider that the blurring of the boundaries we have just witnessed in the historical disciplines has also taken place in a number of other realms. Being involved in the weaving and creation of stories, fictions and narratives, thus, is not a feature of the professional writer or novelist alone. As Cristopher Nash (1990, xi) points out, "[w]e're obliged to consider the ungainly fact that in our culture, where we least expect it and even most vociferously disclaim it, there might actually be storytelling going on, and that the implications may indeed be 'considerable'". The essays Nash (1990) edited in his collection, indeed, show this most compellingly: for example, McCloskey (1990), an economist, argues that economics is best understood as a form of 'poetry' and storytelling, and that "scientific prose like literary prose is complicated and allusive, drawing on a richer rhetoric than mere demonstration" (p. 11); Harré (1990), a philosopher of science, argues that the authority of the apparently objective and neutral conclusions presented in scientific writing derive their

credibility from their being structured as stories, whereby the scientist who formulates and defends his/her hypothesis is presented in heroic terms, as one of the 'good guys', while fellow scientists who undermine that hypothesis or try to deny its legitimacy are 'the bad guys'. Misia Landau (1984, 262) further maintains that "many scientific theories are essentially narratives", and that "many laboratory reports, with their sections labeled "methods," "results", and "conclusions," bear at least a superficial resemblance to a typical narrative, that is, an organized sequence of events with a beginning, a middle, and an end".

Another area where the overlapping of scientific practice and fiction-production has been increasingly suggested is medicine. In particular, Charon (2000, 63) defends the parallel between the medical chart that doctors produce as part of their practice and the literary enterprise of novel-writing. These similarities even extend to a common origin:

> The novel, the clinical case report, and the autopsy report all arose in roughly the same time period for roughly the same reasons: to inspect and embody an individual human being's life and death within mortal time, giving full account of misfortune and suffering and engendering responses of both sympathy and identification in the reader.

It is on the basis of their common purpose and the equal centrality of time (and the passage of time) in both literature and medical practice that Charon (*Ibid.*, 64) feels able to establish a parallel between the practice of the novelist and the doctor, and between the respective results of their work, the novel and the medical chart:

> Both the chart and the novel follow individuals or generations over the stretches of time that transform the human beings on the landscape; both genres confront the primitive and ultimate problem faced by humans as their time runs out; both reject universals and instead emphasize concrete particulars. If, in the words of E. M. Forster, the novel is "a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence – dinner after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death and so on", then the medical chart too is a narrative

> of events arranged in their time sequence – blastocyst after morula, menopause after menarche, decay after death.

Abraham Verghese (2001), a physician-writer himself, agrees and further suggests that the notion of storytelling can illuminate not just the texts that doctors produce, but also their every-day professional practice. Charon (2001, 1897) agrees, and maintains that "[t]he effective practice of medicine requires narrative competence, that is, the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret and act on the stories and plights of others".

Even if we stick with the more strictly 'creative field', to which the novel can be said to belong, the boundaries are not clear-cut. Barry Atkins' (2003) book entitled *More than a Game: The computer game as fictional form*, for instance, describes computer games as 'fictional forms', 'game-fiction' and 'computer-based narrative forms'. Atkins (*Ibid.*, 2) indeed, sees computer games as "an increasingly popular form of fiction that [makes] grand claims for authenticity and realism in its marketing, and [presents] a type of what I thought I recognised as storytelling outside language". As such – the argument goes - video games tell stories following their own conventions (rather than borrowing those of novels or film), but have nonetheless storytelling at their heart, and are thus amenable to exploration through the means of literary-critical practices traditionally adopted for novels in literary and cultural studies (*Ibid*., 9).

What this section has highlighted is the difficulty of drawing a neat dividing line between the novel and other narrative forms. Yet, as we saw in our discussion of 'the arts', without a clear idea of what it is that we are dealing with, it is going to be very difficult to produce a coherent analysis of its impact. The definitions of the novel that we have so far come up with have proved to be very unstable; and none of them have offered ontological characteristics that are unique to the novel. Perhaps, therefore, it is necessary to turn to institutional perspectives, with a view to finding some firm ground in the literary authority of the 'artworld' (Danto 1964).

The Novel and the Literary Canon

Peter Lamarque (1996, 9) has suggested that literary works are primarily '*institutional* objects':

> Inspired imaginings on their own cannot make a text or stretch of discourse into a literary work. Without the existence of a complex social practice or institution in which texts fulfil determinate functions bound by convention, there could be no literary works.

It is through the conferring of 'arthood' on some literary works rather than others that the literary 'artworld' contributes to the creation of a literary canon. The novel, despite representing only the last two centuries in the Western narrative tradition, which itself goes back at least five thousand years, now figures most prominently within the body of works that constitute the Western canon today.

In order to sidestep definitional issues, therefore, we might be tempted to suggest that, when we are exploring the impact of reading fiction, we are looking to understand the ways in which readers react to literary works that the literary establishment (or artworld) has deemed worthy of inclusion in the canon and which, to use Harold Bloom's phrase (1994, 1) have been found to be 'authoritative in our culture'. Focusing on the canon would also appear to be a fruitful way of approaching the study of the impacts of the novel, in that it is often to canonical literary works that 'life-changing' experiences have been attributed. This is in part because the authors of 'serious' or literary novels often explicitly set out to bring about such experiences. George Eliot, for example, argued, in 1879, that the novelist must be a "teacher or influencer of the public mind" (in Roberts 1994b, 11).

Indeed, Bloom (1994, 28), one of the staunchest advocates of the Western literary canon, whilst rejecting this position, acknowledges the fact that the most common argument presented in defence of the canon is to maintain that it embodies all possible moral and civic virtues, which it then transmits to its readers. This view would therefore appear to provide a useful guide for assessing the impact of the novel; yet, as will be made clear, it is in the very nature of the literary canon that the simplifications of this binary view of the novel and its impacts is rejected.

We have remarked earlier on the fluid nature of the canon: what is included in it or excluded from it tends to change over time, in accordance with the beliefs and aesthetics of the time. We referred to Alter's (1996) identification of a more inclusive tendency in the contemporary literary canon resulting from the challenges posed by the cultural relativism of certain strands of postmodern theory. The contemporary canon also tends to include a broader range of works of literature than merely 'works of the imagination', which have nevertheless become central to the Western *literary* tradition.

In other words, the changing and fluctuating nature and composition of the canon ultimately makes it impossible to consider it as a reliable foundation for the identification of novels and for any 'essential' distinction between 'literary' and 'popular' literature. As the case of Shakespeare powerfully indicates, not only can literary work be included or excluded in the literary canon of the time, but their qualification as 'literary' or 'popular' is equally likely to shift over time, thus making this a questionable predictor of the effects that literary works can be expected to have on their readers.

The recent commercial success of the popular literary genre referred to as 'chick-lit'[10] and its perceived connection with (if not even direct derivation from) the 'literary' novels of Jane Austen represents an interesting example of the extent to which the literary/popular divide is in fact much less clear-cut than it might at first appear. There is indeed a widespread consensus among scholars who have devoted themselves to the analysis of chick-lit - and among chick-lit writers themselves - that the origins of the genre can be traced back to Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones Diary*, which in turn, finds in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* its immediate progenitor (Crusie 2005; Ferriss and Young 2006; Yardley 2006). Similarly, Austen's Elizabeth Bennet is commonly seen as the prototype of the chick-lit heroine: humorous, interested in shopping, friendships, and prospective husbands (Swendson 2005). Jennifer Crusie (2005), herself a successful romantic writer, edited a collection of pieces by fellow writers offering as many explorations of the relationship between contemporary chick-lit and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The book is poignantly entitled *Flirting with 'Pride and Prejudice': Fresh perspectives on the original chick-lit masterpiece*. One of the

[10] The label of 'chick-lit' has been developed to refer to "the narrative of the late twenty-to thirty-something single career woman desperately in search of love" (Philips 2000, 238)

contributors to the collection, Lauren Baratz-Logsted (2005, 75), assertively declares: "I have no doubt that if Jane Austen were writing today, she would get labelled as a writer of chick-lit".

What Baratz-Logsted's confident statement sidesteps, however, is a discussion of matters relating to 'literary merit'. However, this is hard to pin down and it tends to evolve with the times and in accordance with the aesthetic values predominant at any one time. 'Literary merit' as Lamarque (1996, 9) reminds us, is not something intrinsic to a work of literature but something that is conferred on it by the cultural establishment of the epoch, is rooted in its prevalent aesthetic values, and is ratified through inclusion in a constantly mutating canon. Elevation to the canon can thus hardly be taken as a reliable indicator of a novel's possible impact on its readers. Once again, ontological and classificatory problems intervene, confirming just how theoretically complex the task of articulating these impacts must necessarily be.

Yet, as the following section suggests, admitting to such complexity is a crucial step towards real progress in researching the social impact of the arts. As Derrida (1988, 119) reminds us, "[o]ne shouldn't complicate things for the pleasure of complicating things, but one should also never simplify or pretend to be sure of simplicity where there is none. If things were simple, word would have gotten out, as you say in English".

Conclusion

This paper has argued that, in order to develop a coherent analysis of the impact of 'the arts', it is first necessary to understand precisely what it is that we are trying to determine the impact of. This has led us to an investigation of what might be said to constitute 'the arts' and, more specifically, literature, fiction and the novel. At every level, ontological difficulties have arisen, to the extent that it has not been possible to arrive at theoretically convincing explanations. Institutional definitions of the arts offered a superficially attractive way out of this impasse by appearing to sidestep essentialist issues; but here, too, we were unable to find firm ground, on account of the pluralised nature of contemporary cultural authority and, in the case of the novel,

the shifting instability of the literary canon. Furthermore, we would suggest that the investigation of any one of the other arts is very likely to throw up similar dilemmas.

Thus, our recourse to the insights of aesthetic theory and literary criticism has still left our original question 'what it is that we are trying to assess the impacts of when we discuss the social impacts of the arts?' without a satisfactory answer. This is perhaps not at all surprising, since – as Terry Eagleton (2007, 1) has recently remarked – "[p]hilosophers have the infuriating habit of analysing questions rather than answering them". As a matter of fact, our necessarily brief and by no means exhaustive discussion of concepts from philosophical and literary theory has brought up a *further* crucial question for the assessment of the impacts of reading for pleasure: if we cannot pinpoint with any degree of confidence what the novel *is*, how can we ever hope to develop robust methodologies to *measure* what it *does*?

By throwing up this question, the arguments discussed here have unambiguous consequences for both the interpretation of impact studies and for further attempts to conduct them. First, the very notion of an 'impact study', which so far has tended to make generalizations about the effects of engagement in either 'the arts' or one artform in particular, appears to be intrinsically flawed. Not only do we have no normative understanding of either the arts *in toto* or a generic category of art, but the diverse practices that can be implied by these terms are simply not commensurate. It logically follows therefore that the impacts arising from these practices will not be commensurate either. Secondly, a great deal of caution is called for when making generalised statements about the impact of the arts on societies. This applies as much to advocates of the arts, who repeatedly appear to overstate their case, as it does to academic researchers.

However, this does not mean that the value or impacts of the arts in our societies are unknowable and that continuing attempts to understand or articulate them are destined to fail. But it does mean that if we are to move beyond a narrowly conceived 'toolkit approach' to arts impact assessment, then we need a systematic engagement with the theoretical questions that the study of the effects of participation in the arts poses.

Finally, whilst suggesting that further research, both theoretical and empirical, is needed in this area, this paper does call for a more modest approach, which recognises the limits of what can be known, generalised and claimed. This, in turn, may entail the acknowledgement that the traditional impact study may, after all, not be a suitable tool for the exploration of the ways in which the arts affect people. While this might be bad news for cultural consultancies and arts administrators looking for appealing advocacy arguments, it might have the effect of opening up research into the impact of the arts in unexpected and rewarding directions.

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